

Impacts of the United Fruit Company in southwest Costa Rica

Impacto de la United Fruit Company en el Suroeste de Costa Rica

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Abstract: When the United Fruit Company arrived in Southwest Costa Rica in 1937, the region was a primeval wilderness with almost no human habitation. To begin the banana port of Golfito, labour and management came from many places. The banana railroad was initiated from both Golfito and the terminal end in Palmar where men and supplies came up the Río Térraba on high tide. Finally, the “golden spike” was driven at the bridge over the Río Esquinas at Kilometre 40 when the Golfito railroad builders met the Palmar gang in late 1940. The first shipment of bananas from Golfito was in March, 1941. Later, thousands of houses were built in company towns and farms for employees at all levels. Schools, social clubs, soccer fields, medical clinics, parks and playgrounds, churches, commissary stores and other amenities were provided by the banana company. A large, well-equipped hospital was built in Golfito. Several airports provided access to San José. In time, the company hired 6,000 employees and frequently had a yearly operating budget of \$80,000,000 USD in order to export 15,000,000 boxes of bananas annually. Fruit came from Palmar, Piedras Blancas-Esquinas, Coto and the Panamá border farms. After a devastating communist-led labour strike in 1984, the Golfito banana division¹ closed. The region went into a severe economic decline that left thousands of employees and their families without jobs. Some of the soils formerly planted with bananas were converted to oil palms and other crops.

Key words: United Fruit Company, Southwest Costa Rica, banana plantations, banana railroad, Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica, Ferrocarril del Sur, Golfito.

Resumen: Cuando la United Fruit Company llegó al suroeste costarricense en el año 1937, la región se presentaba como una extensa selva tropical con escasa población humana. Para abrir el puerto bananero de Golfito se tuvo que importar la mano de obra y los administradores necesarios. Se comenzó la construcción del ferrocarril simultáneamente en Golfito y en su punto terminal en el Palmar, hasta donde llegaban trabajadores y materiales por el Río Térraba en períodos de marea alta. La última escarpia de vía se clavó a finales de 1940 cuando los trabajadores de Golfito se encontraron con los de Palmar cerca del puente del Río Esquinas en el kilómetro 40. La primera carga de bananos salió de Golfito en marzo de 1941. Después se construyeron miles de casas en las fincas y comunidades de la compañía para acomodar a los empleados de todos los niveles. Asimismo, la compañía proveyó escuelas, salas sociales, canchas de fútbol, clínicas médicas, parques y áreas de juego, iglesias, almacenes y otras comodidades para el bienestar del personal. En Golfito se construyó un gran y bien equipado hospital. Varias pistas de aterrizaje permitieron el acceso a San José. Con el tiempo, la compañía contrató a unos 6,000 empleados, llegando a tener un presupuesto de 80 millones de dólares y una exportación de 15 millones de cajas de bananos al año. La fruta procedía de Palmar, Piedras Blancas-Esquinas, Coto y de las fincas de la zona fronteriza de Panamá. Después de un desastroso paro laboral instigado por los comunistas en 1984, la compañía cerró sus operaciones. La región entró en un profundo declive económico que dejó a miles de empleados y sus familias sin trabajo. Eventualmente algunas de las tierras se convirtieron al cultivo de palmas de aceite y otros productos.

Palabras clave: United Fruit Company, sudoeste de Costa Rica, plantaciones de bananos, ferrocarril bananero, Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica, Ferrocarril del Sur, Golfito.

The Golfito Banana Railroad¹

While travelling through Southwest Costa Rica in 1984, I stopped for lunch at an old banana company restaurant near Villa Neily. It was the run-down Coto 47 “comedor”, where, as a bachelor, I had eaten some 25 years earlier. Suddenly, at 11 A.M., a loud steam engine whistle pierced the air. It was a rare and unmistakable

sound – hauntingly familiar – that quickly struck me with nostalgia, as if a ghost had appeared from the past. Next, a lively chatter of excited voices suddenly erupted from the nearby kitchen, and I knew something unusual was about to happen.

¹ Division is defined as an autonomous and separate operation under the United Fruit Company. The Golfito Division extended from the port of Golfito to Coto, the Panama border and northwest to the Río Térraba at Palmar. “Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica” was the subsidiary name.

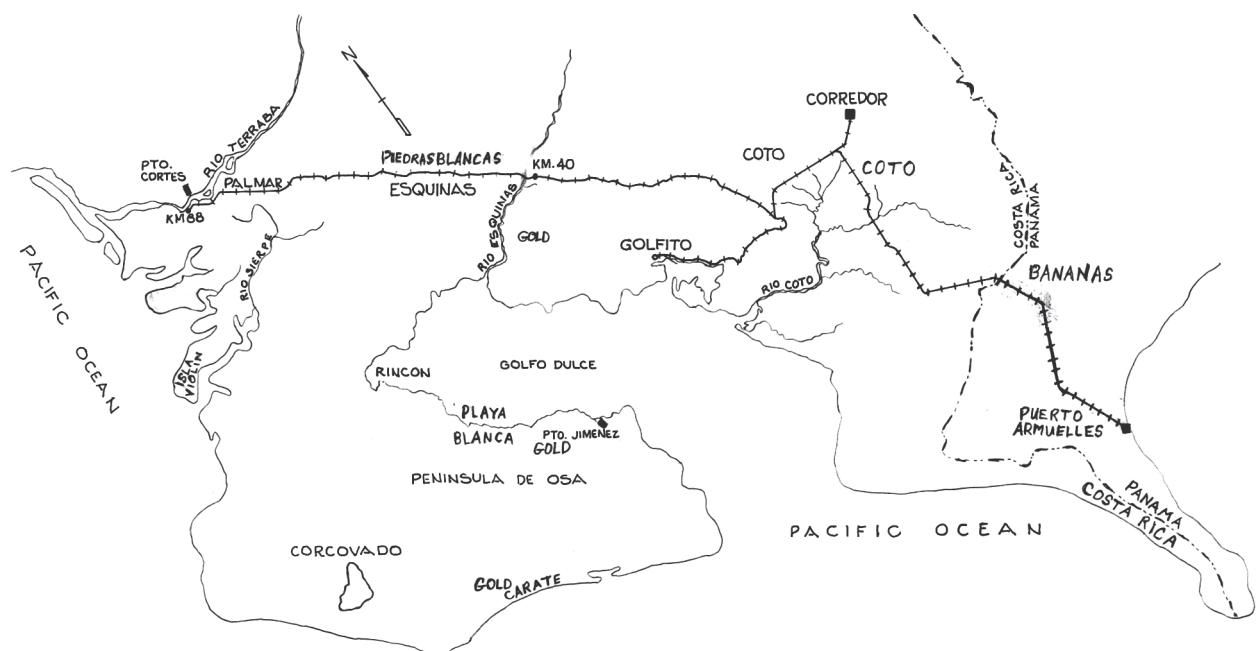


Fig. 1: Southwest Costa Rica showing railroad from Palmar to Golfito. The main line branched through Coto to Corredor (Villa Neily) and continued to the Panamá border. Map by Bill Saravanga.

People started running outside toward the old railroad tracks. To my surprise, those lifeless ribbons of steel came alive again with the approach of a hissing and chugging 80-ton steam locomotive, the last active steamer in all of Costa Rica and perhaps all of Central America. Six of us bystanders lined up with fascination as old engine Number 82 slowly rumbled by. All the while, the engineer continuously blasted the whistle and rang the huge bell as the engine hissed and belched plumes of smoke.

As the obsolete old giant slowly lumbered through Coto for the very last time, people standing next to me exclaimed that they'd never seen a steam locomotive in their entire life. At that moment I realised that this was a rare occasion and probably the last of its kind – ever.

That's because Engine Number 82 – and nearly a dozen other steam locomotives like it – belonged to a by-gone era when a 302-kilometer-long railroad system, "Ferrocarril del Sur", hauled untold tons of fruit from banana farms to the Pacific port for the United Fruit Company (UFC). These farms, the rail lines and towns like Golfito, Palmar, Pozo Norte and Villa Neily had been raised up out of a virgin wilderness of flood plains, swamps and hills by the Company and its employees – soil and land surveyors, engineers, railroad surveyors, managers, foremen and labourers.

Because Panamá disease in the 1920s had decimated many of the United Fruit's banana farms along the

Caribbean coast of Costa Rica and Panamá, the Company had been forced to explore and plant new soils on the Pacific side of these two neighbouring countries. Puerto Armuelles on Panamá's Pacific shore had been developed a decade earlier and Quepos in Costa Rica was underway when nearby Golfito began to awaken from a primeval state in 1937.

For the proposed Golfito project, soil surveys showed that nearly 5,700 hectares of bananas could be planted between the Sierpe and Térraba rivers. Twenty farms were initially projected, including Farm 20 that bordered the salty mangrove estuaries.

It took several years to build the Golfito Division. Tough, hardy men came to the region in the late 1930s to fell thousands of giant trees with axes, but many of these men became debilitated after several months because of the harsh environment, disease and a poor diet.

Some of the labourers were from Nicaragua; others were of Nicaraguan origin from Costa Rica's Northwest province of Guanacaste. It was difficult to lure Costa Ricans down from their cool, healthy highlands. Many of those who did come frequently returned home as soon as they could. Special recruiters promised incentive bonuses to those who stayed, but many left anyway. As a result, tough Hondurans and more Nicaraguans were imported by ship.

Some of the Nicaraguans came to Costa Rica by foot. Three old-timers, the Gutierrez brothers, told me

how they had heard of jobs provided by United Fruit Company. These destitute men were weary of abject poverty and political turmoil in Nicaragua and started walking south in hopes of finding work. They crossed the unmarked international boundary without documents. For six weeks, the migrants wandered on jungle trails before reaching southern Costa Rica and gaining employment with the United Fruit Company. These men found a new life and good pay for over 40 years with the banana company.

Many others on the work force were also foreigners. Railroad foremen like Luis Fernandez were predominately from Spain. Project engineers were Americans, but most of the field engineers and surveyors were Costa Ricans. Yugoslavs, who had been recruited from the Panamá Canal Zone in the 1930s, handled heavy equipment and building construction. Other Europeans were present also. Henry "Scotty" Crichton from Scotland was an electrician and his Scottish father built the ice plant in Golfito. Paul Hari, a French Swiss, was hired to landscape the division. Golfito later became the most exotically landscaped Company town, thanks to Paul Hari and his appreciative patron, Manager Norman Sanderson, an Englishman with colonial experience in the tropics.

Negro labour was conspicuously absent on this project. The Costa Rican government prohibited the Company from bringing over descendants of Jamaicans and other West Indian labourers living on the East Coast of the country. Fifty years earlier, these people had built the railroad from Limón to San José. Even today, very few Afro-Costa Ricans cross the mountain from the Caribbean to work on the Pacific side.

The Soil Surveyors

Some of the first pioneers of the planned Golfito Division were soil surveyors. Dr. Vining. C. "Doc" Dunlap had just finished the 1927 surveys in Puerto Armuelles when he made a famous trek by foot through the wilderness from the Panamá side to the future port of Golfito in Costa Rica. His soil expedition took weeks as they hacked their way across the virgin Coto Valley that lay in between.

Further north, some 80 kilometres north-west of Coto, G.C. Kincaid, S.L. "Pop" Worley and William Van Diepen made soil surveys and maps in 1937-38 of both sides of the Río Térraba at what is now Palmar. In 1941, the region that became Coto Norte was surveyed in detail by Kincaid. Seven years later, Francisco A. Sierra, a young Guatemalan, spent six months evaluating soils of Coto Sur. These brave men lived in the jungle for weeks at a time, camping in temporary palm thatch "ranchos".



Fig. 2: Some of the men that built the Division of Golfito, Costa Rica, at an Engineering party in the Golf Club in 1946. Left to right, Back row: Hermann Key, Jr., Luis Fernandez, Daniel Radan, Roberto Hurtado, Van Peski, Arturo Mora, Carlos Delgadillo, Marco Tulio Acuña. Front row: Bernardo Botazzi, Federico Mora, Frank Glavas, Evenor Diaz, Alfredo Enestroza, Carlos Arrazola, Filadelfo Soto, Fortunato Erak, Hermann Key, Sr., Roger Mora. Sitting: Franz Thieman.

Their diet was rice, beans and wild game shot along the survey lines by hired hunters. It was their survey maps that determined where plantations and railroads would be constructed for the "Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica", successor of the Golfo Dulce Land Company, a land acquisition agency under Fernando Castro.

Port Construction

When the first port surveyors and engineers landed on the Golfito mud flat, there was no human habitation. A crude camp was set up and plans for the wharf began under the direction of Thomas J. Barnett. Others involved with the port construction were Yugoslavs Steve Boscovich, Frank Glavas, Charlie Brlevich, Austrian engineer Emil Streichen and several Americans, including J. W. Moore, the first Manager of the Golfito Division. Initially, a ship was anchored in the harbour to house these employees and store materials until basic facilities were constructed ashore. Although preparations were underway in 1938, the wharf was not completed until February of 1941, at a cost of just over half a million dollars US.

I had heard brief accounts about these monumental engineering tasks from Frank Glavas and Costa Ricans Willie Acosta and Juan Macaya Lehmann, the latter a graduate of Stanford University in California. In 1937, prior to establishing the port, Puerto Jimenez on the Peninsula de Osa served as a temporary land base of operations from which to launch the Golfito port project. The temporary office purchased bananas from small growers scattered along the Golfo Dulce, Río Esquinas

and Río Coto. This purchased fruit was barged for 24 hours up the Pacific coast to Puntarenas for rail shipment across the entire country to the Caribbean port of Limón. This meant that banana bunches were man-handled nine times before reaching the consumer, a rough trip even for the rugged Gros Michel variety.

The Airports

The Company built an airstrip at Puerto Jimenez so ENTA could fly in engineers and surveyors to initiate the Golfito project. Personnel crossed the wide Golfo Dulce in a large dugout and entered the calm Golfito harbour that was virtually untouched by modern man. Only three little Indian “ranchos” occupied this beautiful, protected bay. On the east side of the deep channel entering the harbour was a coconut grove on a narrow sand bank. Engineers precariously unloaded a bulldozer onto the beach and levelled the sand to make another temporary airport only a kilometre in front of the future wharf site. The permanent Golfito airport between two mountains was not constructed until the early 1940s, heralding the arrival of TACA with its tri-motor Ford aeroplanes.

Alva Bailey (later Saravanja) was a young woman in Palmar and remembers that the Company wanted to cut down Venancio Mora’s revered ceiba tree that was at the end of the new airfield. Ironically, a pilot for TACA, Captain Cholo Chaves, an Indian himself, requested that the tree be left because it served him as a landmark to land in bad weather, especially when the towering tree rose above the morning ground fog. Alva also recalls that Boruca Indians wearing shawls and blankets came from across the Térraba River to watch TACA’s tri-motor aeroplanes land and take off. Because they did not realise the danger from standing on the airfield, someone always had to chase them back to a safe distance.

Railroad Surveyors

The railroad survey gang landed in the Golfito bay in 1937. About four kilometres south-east of the wharf site, they made a small thatch hut from poles and palm leaves, cut from the lush rainforest which extended down to the water’s edge. Soon, a larger and more comfortable “rancho” served as their base camp. Nevertheless, living conditions were crude. Beans and rice with plantains was the usual dish but wild hog, deer, te-pequintle (a large rodent) and fish also graced the table.

To create a shortcut from the port to the rail line’s destination at what would become Palmar, engineers originally considered tunnelling through the pass to Río La Gamba north-west of Golfito’s current airport and

then on to Palmar. However, the final plan routed the line eastward from Golfito, around the mountain via Coto.

As the survey progressed along the bay shore, it became ominously clear that there would need to be a lot of blasting and deep cuts through the steep hills that sloped directly into the water. Landslides continually buried their work, even after the first rails were laid. An old-time executive, George P. Chittenden, General Manager of all Costa Rican operations and based in San José, would visit Golfito to review these monumental problems and tasks.

Next, the railway survey gang penetrated 15 kilometres inland near the Coto Valley and found an impenetrable swamp between the hills. This bottomless bog was later named “Llano Seco” (Dry Plain), an intentionally contradictory description of the area. The name evolved from a humorous play on words “ya no seca” – it won’t dry up. A deep canal failed to drain the morass and the railroad had to be carved into the sides of the steep hills along the swamp. Today, this swamp still persists and serves as an important bird rookery and wildlife refuge.

One of the Golfito Division’s pioneer railway survey engineers, Juan Macaya Lehmann, was originally hired in San José by Engineer Arturo Tinoco and then flown to Palmar in April 1937 in a single-engine plane belonging to ENTA. The pilot, Bob Edgerton, landed in Spaniard Francisco Olaso’s cow pasture. Don Juan’s group rode mules an hour to cross a deep swamp before reaching Pozo Norte, a new settlement on the north bank of the Río Térraba.

Tiny Pozo Norte could be reached by light river traffic and only during high tide. The settlement had been named Pozo (water well) because Padre Nievorwsky, a Catholic missionary to the Boruca Indians, had dug a well there. All together, there were two wooden buildings, one rented to the Company, and about 15 palm “ranchos”. Domingo Chan ran a store, and Maria Wong kept a cantina with a marimba for making dance music.

Macaya’s first job was to survey a right-of-way and construct a small, temporary 36-inch rail line along each bank of the Térraba River. These tram lines started from the mangrove swamps and extended upriver to the hills. Once operational, the temporary lines hauled Gros Michel bananas planted along the river by small growers like Juan Bocker, Bienvenido Gutierrez, the immigrant white Jamaican Webb family, Maria Wong, Juan Chan and several Indians.

Also, the legendary Indian “cacique” (chief), Venancio Mora, acted as the agent for other Indians in Palmar Norte and brought their bananas in dugouts across the

river to Macaya's tramline at Palmar Sur. A small steam engine pulled the bunches of fruit on small flat cars to a barge at Pozo Sur. From there, the fruit was shipped down river at high tide and out to sea to Puntarenas for transfer to railcars. This perishable cargo crossed the entire country to Port Limón for loading onto steamers of the Great White Fleet.

Getting the railway right-of-way was not always easy. The Company usually found ways to persuade squatters and landowners to sell out, but there were exceptions. Indian Chief Venancio Mora owned land where the Company later made the airport at Palmar Sur. The Boruca chief produced cacao and bananas and refused to sell out. On his land stood a well-known landmark, a giant ceiba tree, sacred to many Indians of Central America. This majestic tree stood as a symbol of respect and freedom and impressed all who saw it. Only after the chief's death was the tree felled. Appropriately, this colossal ceiba tree was immortalised on the cover of Dr. Paul Allen's book, "The Rain Forests of Golfo Dulce".

Railroad Construction

In 1938, construction on the Golfito-Palmar railroad line was started, commencing at each end at about the same time, under the direction of Edward Crawford. After large amounts of material, supplies and manpower were shipped up the tricky Río Térraba, the Palmar end of the railroad was started near what later became Farm 16, some 92 kilometres from Golfito. A good ballast pit provided river rocks to firm the swampy, alluvial soil under the line. Rails were spaced 42 inches apart on top of treated pine crossties from Alabama, United States. Handling crossties treated with creosote was an awful job because the preservative burned the men's skin, but the work continued.

The labour gang of about 100 tough men constructed 500 meters of line a day if everything went right. However, they were slowed down at the many streams because they had to construct the bridges themselves. There were no pile drivers like they had used in Cuba and Honduras. Consequently, heavy bridge posts and pilings had to be set by hand. Branch lines proliferated throughout the Palmar alluvial plain to fit the design of future banana farms where the great tropical forest still stood. For example, a spur was built to Río Sierpe to plant farms and transfer cargo barged across the treacherous river mouth at Isla Violín.

By 1939, the main line was being pushed from Palmar towards Golfito. With 5.000 mm of rain a year, construction through mud, flooded swamps and virgin forests was a supreme challenge. Health hazards were always a menace. Men were forced to take a daily dose of



Fig. 3: The Golfito-Palmar railroad was built through a virgin wilderness of swamps and jungles in Southwest Costa Rica and was completed in 1941.

quinine to reduce the risks of malaria. This awful treatment was rewarded with a free shot of rum afterwards to wash down the medicine. There were accidents and deaths, some not so accidental. Machete fights were common during wild Saturday night sprees, especially among the Nicaraguans and Hondurans. Blood and guts were spilled in machete fights almost weekly in the labour camps and bush cantinas. Life was cheap, and a man had to be tough and cautious to survive.

Upon reaching Río Piedras Blancas, a sizeable truss span was built across the cold, mountain river. Later, these rugged men reached Río Esquinas where a large overhead bridge was under construction. It was over 50 kilometres back to Palmar where they had started two years earlier.

From the other end, the Golfito railroad gang had been delayed in their push to meet the Palmar builders because of devastating landslides near Golfito and at the hilly pass at El Alto near Kilometre 35. Meanwhile, the planting of bananas continued in Palmar. Forests were felled, plantations were started and fruit was shipped down the river by barge to Puntarenas. To move fruit and materials, several 80-ton steam locomotives were barged up the river and winched onto a track at the river's edge at the old Farm 16 dock. Incredibly, the heavy machines were lifted and positioned onto the rails without a single mishap. These locomotives and numerous supplies had arrived from the Division of Puerto Castilla, Honduras, which had been closed and dismantled because of Panamá disease.

It took more than two years of hard labour for the two work gangs to meet in the middle and thereby com-

plete the 88-kilometer main line. When completed, the railroad would transport bananas from Palmar and Esquinas to Golfito.

The Workers and their "Jefes"

The Company had planned to pay the workers in U.S. dollars. However, this would have caused an exodus of labour from the country's highland coffee farms due to a favourable exchange rate of about five Costa Rican colones per dollar. Consequently, coffee farmers protested and the government ordered the Company to pay in colones. Men worked eight, hard hours a day for one colón per hour – about \$1.60 a day – a desirable wage then. Attractive wages were paid in order to keep men working under such miserable circumstances.

In Palmar, I talked with electrician Luis Solano who had worked 45 years for the Company. He started work at age 14 when his father brought him from San José in 1938. Don Luis started off at 60 "céntimos" of one "colón" per hour (\$0.12) as an office boy for Andy Holcombe and Franz Eduarte, who lived in humble quarters on the south bank of Río Téraba at "La Administración" where the original Farm 11 was built. Andy Holcombe was in charge of agricultural operations in Palmar and Franz Eduarte was his chief clerk.

During the day, developing the Palmar plantations and railroad was hard work, but the "jefes" relaxed and had entertainment during the evening. White Label Scotch was cheap in the new Company commissary and heavy drinking was a common diversion. This pastime helped men to forget solitude, amoebas, malaria and other personal miseries. On the musical side, Solano was a good guitar player and singer and spent many, long nights singing "rancheros" for the bosses. There were always good guitar players around. Such happy evenings were commonly spent at home, but impulsively and frequently, the group would take a dugout "cayuco" down the river to María Wong's cantina in Pozo Norte where good times awaited. Getting back home upriver was a serious challenge and not fun at all, especially when they arrived just in time to begin work.

Solano advised me to visit an old Spaniard, Francisco Otero, who had been a chief foreman on the railroad. I drove through the Palmar banana farms to Otero's pig and cattle farm located between old Farm 11 and the Río Téraba. The farm had many pigs and about two hundred head of cattle that ate mostly green, reject bananas. Señor Otero – known to everyone by his nickname, don Pancho – had just arrived from town on his bicycle. He explained that he liked the exercise; besides, he couldn't drive a car. In fact, he cycled every day from his Farm 12 home to Palmar Norte to do business,

then to the farm and back home again, biking 26 kilometres on hazardous gravel roads. Indeed, he looked very fit for a man of 80.

I was told that he had married a local woman, then later lived with her sister. Thus his two sets of children from the sisters were both half-siblings and first cousins to each other. Being a "Gallego" from Spain, he had green eyes and was light-skinned with a reddish complexion. His smile revealed a mouthful of gold teeth. After all these years, he still had a mild Spanish accent. The man left Spain to work on United Fruit Company railroads in Cuba in 1928. Later, the Company sent him and other Spaniards to the Truxillo Railroad Company at Puerto Castilla, Honduras. In the mid-1930s, his railroad work gang was transferred to Costa Rica to start the new line in Quepos. In 1938, he was sent on the Company launch down the coast to Palmar to begin the new railroad to Golfito. Thus, Señor Otero was an experienced railroad man when he came to the area.

When Francisco Otero and his small group landed during the high tide at Pozo Norte, they saw nothing but wilderness on both sides of the river. There was no one to meet them, but they were told to cross the river, take a foot trail up the south bank through the forest and report to the project engineer. Cold rain drenched them and their little tote sacks of personal belongings. It was getting late when they arrived at a clearing in the jungle where there was a large palm thatch "rancho". They went inside and saw cots and hammocks with mosquito nets hanging from poles.

The floor was bare earth. Attached to the "rancho" was a cookhouse made of palm leaves and wild cane poles for the walls. Smoke was rising up through the roof of palm leaves that helped to cure and preserve the thatch. A tall "macho" Texan was talking to the cook, a woman from Guanacaste, who was boiling rice, beans and some wild game. Otero and his men were wet, cold and hungry when they reported to the engineer in charge, but the boss didn't pay much attention to them.

Harsh conditions were nothing new to Otero because he had experienced similar situations in Cuba, Honduras and Quepos. But the reception by this "gringo" was unexpected, gruff and unreasonable. The Texan told Otero and his men to go find a "rancho" and food elsewhere. What a ridiculous order at such a late hour out in the wet jungle! Don Pancho was a feisty, bold man and had his pride. He quickly informed the "hueputa gringo" that he had been sent to help start the railroad and had no intention of sleeping in the jungle like an animal. Both he and his men would get lodging and food there, or they'd go back to Quepos on the next

boat. Hearing the ultimatum, the tough and inconsiderate “gringo” reluctantly assigned them hammocks and gave them a hot supper.

Ironically, this base camp, “La Administración”, was on the very farm that Otero now owned and on the spot where we were talking. “La Administración” was later destroyed in the devastating 1954 flood. After the flood, it was totally abandoned and moved to Palmar Sur where the main centre of operations had existed since the early 1940s.

Another entry in my notebook was about don José whom I met in 1983 when I visited the area and stopped to drink a soda at a “pulperia” (store). This was near the site where the Palmar and Golfito railroad builders finally met in the middle. While the proprietor of the little store knew nothing about railroad history, he advised me to talk with don José who was chopping bush some distance behind the store. I walked about 15 minutes up a steep, muddy trail and came upon don José, swinging a machete in the mid-day sun at the furious pace of a young man.

I thought the poor old fellow was going to fall apart. His knees were weak and wobbly, and his frail body was trembling when he finally stopped to talk to me. He was friendly, spirited and told me that he was over 80. I thought that the old man should have sat down for a rest, but instead, he wiped away the sweat and started to file his machete while we talked. Such was the custom of a hard-working Nicaraguan “campesino”.

Don José left his native Nicaragua with his parents when he was 14. They hastily retreated down the Río San Juan del Norte during a political upheaval, then drifted in their dugout down the Caribbean coast to Limón, Costa Rica. There, he and his father found work in the United Fruit Company banana farms. In 1937, don José left Limón by train and went to Puntarenas on the Pacific coast. He transferred to a United Fruit Company launch headed for the new division of Quepos that was just being developed, but the Company sent him on to Palmar to work on the new Golfito-Palmer railroad project. Don José showed me where the “golden spike” had been driven, and I left him to his bush chopping.

Sid Banack and Sam Russell also epitomised the early generation of rugged and adventurous banana men. Sid “Slim” Banack, and Sam Russell were sent from Puerto Armuelles, Panamá, just around the point in 1938 to start work on the railroad. When they arrived, only three houses had been built. Soon Banack’s children came. Young Sid and his sister, Florence, were the first American children to live in Golfito. They watched as the shoreline forests were cleared and the sticky, clay hillsides terraced by heavy tractors to build houses, engi-

neering shops, offices and the hospital. With 5.000mm of rainfall a year, the place was a miserable mud hole during the early years of construction. But such conditions were nothing new to this family.

The elder Sid Banack had started railroading at an early age. He was born of Polish parents in 1900 and left his native Chicago at age 16 to work on Flagler’s Overseas Railroad to Key West, Florida. Afterwards, he worked several years on the north-east coast of Cuba with the United Fruit Company sugar cane divisions on Nipe Bay near the towns of Banes and Preston. Later, Banack worked for United Fruit’s Truxillo Railroad Company at Puerto Castilla, Honduras. In 1928, he was transferred to Puerto Armuelles, Panamá, to help start the new Chiriquí Land Company as train master.

Sam Russell discovered railroading later in life. When his trucking business in Lakeland, Florida, went broke during the depression in the early 1930s, he took his wife, Florence, and teenage daughter, Gwen, to Puerto Armuelles where he became yardmaster of the railhead. As a refugee from the economic depression, Russell, like many other depression-era employees, was grateful to have any job, regardless of the low pay, and have a free Company house with a place to grow a garden.

Three months after the family arrived, Gwen married Sid Banack, probably the tallest employee in the Company. The couple spent their honeymoon in the mountain town of Boquete in the Panamonte Hotel, five hours away by Company rail car. In 1932, their baby, Sidney, Jr., was the first American to be born in the new Puerto Armuelles hospital. Six years later, the Banacks and Russells went around Burica Point to the Golfito wilderness to help launch the new “Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica” project.

Life was hard for all of the employees, but they also enjoyed their leisure living and lifestyles in the tropics. White Label Scotch was only \$2.00 a bottle in the new commissary. There was also considerable gambling at poker for high stakes, rolling “chingona” dice for drinks, and occasionally, Sam Russell would liven up the place with folk songs and fiddle playing. These men found a way to survive while opening up wild, new frontiers for the world’s biggest banana company.

The Golden Spike

After two years of hard labour, delays and high costs, the Golfito-Palmar line was completed when the two railroad construction gangs met in late 1940 at the Esquinas River Bridge near Kilometre 40, the distance from Golfito. The Company organised a memorable celebration with glutinous amounts of food, drinks and emo-

Fig. 4: Golfito, Costa Rica, 1949, a decade after initiation. This banana port was built by United Fruit Company that exported bananas from here for 43 years until 1984.



tional speeches. Manager Norman Sanderson was there with the chief engineer, Franz Thieman, and others from the staff. They arrived from Golfito in the manager's special motor car. Sam Russell and other staff members arrived from the Palmar end in their motor cars.

A special train was dispatched to accommodate the many guests. Faithful to tradition, a golden spike was driven and cheers went up. Danilo Flores, later to become head of the construction department, thereafter claimed to have the golden spike in his possession. However, he noted that the spike was not solid gold but had been painted with gold paint. Nevertheless, it was symbolic and had great meaning to the many proud railroad men present.

Over 40 years later, when I took a walk down the tracks to Kilometre 40 where the golden spike had been driven, I expected to see a historical marker commemorating that great event. Surprisingly, there was nothing to see. In a state of disappointment, I stood there dripping wet in the sweltering mid-day heat and visualised the grand ceremony and fiesta of eating, drinking and speechmaking at the "golden spike" ceremony. That is also where I decided to write this story.

Inauguration of the Port

Soon after the completion of the railroad's main line, the first train with fruit steamed from Palmar to Golfito and loaded aboard the San Bruno at the new wharf on March 2, 1941. This long-awaited first shipment heralded the beginning of full-scale banana operations, although the jubilant event was somewhat dimmed by the outbreak of World War II later that year. Because of its proximity to the Panamá Canal, just a few hundred kilometres away, Golfito and the entire coast were deemed a strategic area for the U.S. military to guard against German and Japanese attacks. Navy vessels and submarines gathered around their mother ships in the protected Golfito harbour and the open Golfo Dulce. This foretold bad news for the banana business every where, and normal operations would not resume until well after the war was over in 1945.

The Company Towns

Not only did the United Fruit Company build railroads and develop massive banana farms, the Company also built the towns like Golfito, Palmar, and Coto 47. Other towns emerged because of their proximity to Company developments. An example is Pozo Norte (later called Puerto Cortes, then Ciudad Cortes) and Corredor (Villa Neily, later Ciudad Neily). With new activity by the Company, Pozo Norte virtually sprang up out of the



Fig. 5: View of Palmar, Costa Rica, looking down the Río Térraba. These isolated Company towns were complete with housing for all employees, schools, offices, machine and carpenter shops, offices, churches, medical clinic with doctors, vegetable gardens, fruit orchards and a commissary store. For recreation, there were tennis, golf, swimming, soccer, social clubs, parks and playgrounds. An airport served local airlines and the Company plane. A passenger and cargo train went daily to Coto and Golfito. The author lived in the bachelor's quarters (shown in the rear row) in 1959. Banana plantations are seen on both banks down river.

jungle. The village became a base camp for the banana company and the few new settlers just arriving. To get there, people left the port of Puntarenas aboard small launches, tugboats and barges loaded with supplies and went up the Térraba at high tide.

Outside the new town of Pozo Norte, Chinese and Costa Rican farmers started rice farms, along with a handful of wandering Panamanian “campesinos”. The white Jamaican Webb family had just staked large claims along the north bank of the Río Térraba. Also, a village of Boruca Indians still occupied the plain where the river left the canyon at Palmar Norte.

Hundreds of hectares had been planted by the Company, and also by the Webb family and others on the north bank of the Río Térraba. Fruit from the north bank was hauled over Juan Macaya's tramline, then across the river on a towering aerial cable to a railhead for transfer to Golfito. Johnny Saravanja, one of the Yugoslavs, had to rebuild this aerial cable over the river after a strong earthquake shuffled the high supporting towers out of alignment. Originally, a cross-river cable was built at Pozo Norte but a flood washed it downstream.

Outside of the banana towns and plantations, the vast remainder of land was covered with primeval forests for 100 kilometres all the way to Panamá. Northwest of Palmar, the same forests stretched another 100 kilometres up the coast to the other new United Fruit Company banana development at Quepos. To the interior, the virgin wilderness extended over the high Talamanca mountains to the Caribbean. Only a few Indians knew the scattered trails beneath the infinite and imposing canopy of tropical trees. For the naturalist, this was a climactic work of evolutionary splendour. But to the engineers and agriculturists, the wilderness was a pestilent green, tropical hell where challenges would be conquered and yield millions in “green and yellow gold” for the United Fruit Company.

The Coto Extension

The next railroad project connecting the Golfito-Palmar main line was developed as a result of World War II. To protect the Panamá Canal, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hastened the development of the proposed Pan-American Highway as a defense strategy, because Panamá and Costa Rica had almost no internal roads. Consequently, the U.S. Government contracted with the Wunderlich Company in 1941 to start building the Pan-American Highway. This road was to cross the international border near Sabalito in the interior Coto Brus watershed of Costa Rica. Since the entire region was uninhabited except for a few Indians, an access link had to be built to carry supplies, men and machines from

the new port of Golfito to the interior in order to start the highway.

The first part of the link was a railroad branching from the Golfito-Palmar main line through the virgin Coto Valley to Corredor, later called Villa Neily, named after an Arab immigrant, Ricardo Neily. The United Fruit Company built this line for Wunderlich and finished the railroad in about nine months. From Villa Neily, an incredible gravel road was carved up the cliff-like “Fila de Cal” to Sabalito and the Panamá border at La Unión. After completion of the rail line, the Wunderlich Company mysteriously disappeared. Although much of the access road across the mountain was under construction, the project was suddenly abandoned. Military defense strategy had apparently changed.

Because of the war, the rail line across Coto lay dormant until 1948 when the first Coto banana farms were planted. About 1952, the Coto line was extended across the Coto Sur swamp to the Panamá border. The Chiriquí Land Company on the Panamá side had planted bananas on the Costa Rican side, and the fruit was being exported from Panamá's Puerto Armuelles. These border farms in the Colorado District had 36-inch gauge rail lines from the Panamá side. This prevented Costa Rican rail traffic with its 42-inch gauge line from going beyond the Panamá border at Laurel and Puerto Gonzalez, except for a short distance on a “third rail.” This two-gauge situation ended in 1963 when the Chiriquí Land Company relinquished control of the Costa Rican side and the Golfito Division absorbed the operation. To conform to Costa Rica's standard gauge, all of the old Panamá rail lines in the Colorado District had to be spread from 36 to 42 inches in order to connect with the Golfito main line.

The very last rail lines in the Golfito Division were constructed in 1959-61 in West Coto when the remaining primeval forests were felled for banana farms. I witnessed this feat of engineering while I was assigned to the Coto 47 Research Station, but seeing a total wipe-out of all the fauna and flora of this magnificent ecosystem left me confused and questioning. What a sacrifice, but that was the way bananas were planted.

During this same time, the Pan-American Highway had been re-routed from the interior of the country and was currently being constructed parallel to the main rail line between Coto and Palmar. This gave employees more freedom to drive their jeeps outside the banana zone for the first time and resulted in less dependency on rail passenger cars. Nevertheless, trains still hauled the fruit to port.

The End of an Era

In total, the three giant Pacific coast developments at Puerto Armuelles, Golfito and Quepos produced hundreds of millions of bunches of Gros Michel bananas, all within a 160-kilometer stretch along the Pacific Coast. The Puerto Armuelles plantations, including the extension across the international boundary on the Costa Rican side, formed the world's largest single block of bananas – about 12.000 hectares.

In the early 1980s, a sharp decline in the system occurred when Coto was converted from bananas to oil palm plantations that did not need railroads. Afterwards, only the original 88-kilometer main line was maintained to transport bananas from Palmar to Golfito. Much of the extra railroad rolling stock was transferred. As permanent historical memorials, two large 80-ton steam locomotives were mounted and displayed in parks, one in Golfito and the other in Palmar, to symbolise what was once the mighty "Ferrocarril del Sur".

After nearly half a century of operation, the Company closed down the entire railroad in 1984 after a devastating, communist-led labour strike. Ironically, banana workers stopped work in sympathy for African oil palm workers on strike in Coto. Unfortunately, this backfired because banana operations were shut down in Palmar. This also caused the port of Golfito to become dead and silent. Suddenly, thousands of workers in the banana farms and in the port were out of work and left in a state of shock. Within a year, the plantations and the railroad rapidly grew back into jungle. Thus ended a great era of banana production and banana railroading in Southwest Costa Rica (STEPHENS 2002).

Reference

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